

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Has Israel Fallen Irrecoverably?

By Dan Trygg

“I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!”

Romans 11:11-13

The remainder of Romans 11 deals with God’s future plans for Israel, and how the growth of the church among Gentile peoples fits in with His purpose to redeem Israel. He begins this section by asking the question, “Did they stumble so as to fall?” The Greek comes across a little stronger, **“Did they stumble in order that they might fall?”** The implication is that if they were to “fall” in this way, it would be a *permanent demise*, ...like what had happened to many of the other OT nations that had been hostile to Israel. There are no more Philistines, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, Assyrians, Babylonians, etc. They have all ceased to be identifiable nations. They *had* stumbled in order that they might fall. In fact, God had pronounced such a judgment against each of these other nations, ...and none of them exists today as a people, or even as a distinct ethnic people-group. By contrast, **over and over God has promised to not allow Israel to be completely extinguished.** They would bear consequences for their disloyalty and sins, but He promised that as long as there is a sun, moon, stars and the fixed order of day and night, He would never abandon Israel, or cast them off from His covenant interest in them (Jer. 31:35-37). Though they deserved to become like Sodom and Gomorrah, yet God had preserved a remnant (Isa. 1:1-9). **God is NOT done with Israel.** Even in the passage Paul alludes to here, Deuteronomy 32:15-21, **God would make them jealous by showing His favor and interactions with another nation.** Just like they had turned away from Him to serve other gods, so He would turn His face away from them and provoke them to jealousy and anger by showing His interest and favor toward another nation, ...even a foolish nation! **The purpose of all this, however, is TO WIN THEM BACK!** It is amazing to consider that God revealed all of this to Moses some 1450 years before Christ!

“...by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles.” This is exactly what Moses had prophesied so many years before! **So, there has been a shift from God’s working with the nation of Israel,** revealing Himself and His plan to them, preparing the way for the Messiah, **to now working with the Gentiles,** “other nations”, even “foolish nations”, in order to move Israel to jealousy. **This is an important realization. Jesus’ ministry was primarily focused on revealing Himself to the Jews.** For example, when interacting with the Canaanite woman, who wanted freedom for her daughter from demonic harassment, Jesus initially put her off, saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:22-24). When He sent out the 12 apostles to go out on *their* first missionary journey, He instructed them NOT to go to the Gentiles, or even Samaritans, but “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-18). [Note, however, that Gentiles were not far from His mind. He told them that they would be persecuted, but their testimony would be a witness not only to the Jews, but also “to the Gentiles” (vs. 18).] **This priority in favor of the Jews was carried over into the early apostolic preaching of the gospel message.** “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16), but when the Jews would reject the message, the apostolic preachers would turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).

Jesus had also prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and the Jewish nation would once again be scattered among the nations. The Gentiles would “trample underfoot” Jerusalem until “the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk. 21:24). The wording of this statement indicates that **Jesus saw that a shift away from Israel would be taking place,** and the Gentiles would not only be in control of Jerusalem, but this period of time seems to be a period of ascendancy for these other nations. Interestingly, it was in 1967, during the Six Day War, that the Israeli forces finally seized control over Jerusalem, once again. It had been sacked by the Romans in 70 A.D., and the Jews were expelled. For 1900 years it had been unquestionably “trampled underfoot by the Gentiles”. It is hard to believe that it has been over 50 years since that event. Whether *this* is the fulfillment Jesus was referring to is not fully evident, but it was certainly a significant prophetic and political shift.

“Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” The word for “transgression” here literally means “falling aside”. In other words, the Jews did not necessarily consciously know they were disobeying God. **The word, “transgression”, sounds like a conscious act of disobedience.** In most cases, they were self-deceived, not willfully disobedient. They “fell aside” or “stumbled off the path”. **The word for “failure” refers to their loss of status as being the people God was working with in a unique way.** A “loss” or “defeat”, in that they fell from being at the center of God’s revelatory plan. **What did that mean?** It meant that **God turned to the other nations to reveal Himself.** What Israel “lost” was

distributed to the Gentiles. Their “stumbling-aside” and “loss” meant spiritual opportunity, revelation and blessing to the other nations. Paul asks the question, “If these blessings came to Gentiles through Israel’s wandering and loss, what will happen when the Jews get back on track and are added once again to the active people of faith?”

Paul magnified his ministry among the Gentiles, so that he might provoke his Jewish countrymen to jealousy and save some of them. “For if their being rejected is reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” Again, Paul saw the return of Israel in a much larger, eschatological way. He seems to be hinting that a major conversion of Israel will take place at the end of the age.

“But if the first-portion is holy, so also is the batch of dough; and if the root is holy, so also are the branches.” Paul approaches this whole discussion from another angle, to bring out a different perspective on this relationship of Jews and Gentiles. If a sampling from the lump of dough, a representative portion, was holy or pure, then the entire lump must also be holy. Similarly, if the root stock of a tree is holy, then the branches that grow out of it are also holy. These are clear, easily recognizable illustrations from everyday life. Paul builds upon the latter word picture. “If some branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became a partaker of the rich root of the olive tree...” The illustration is very unusual, but understandable. There are actually two trees: The cultivated, pruned and cared-for tree, ...and another wild, untended olive tree. Everyone would understand that the cultivated tree would have been rich, hearty and healthy, but the wild tree would have been spindly, weak and inferior. In this figure, branches from the cultivated tree were removed, and wild branches were grafted in to take their place. When they were grafted in, they benefitted from the strength and vitality of the healthy tree. “...do not be arrogant toward the branches...” (vs. 18). In the word-picture, some of the errant Jews were removed from the “tree of faith”, and Gentiles were “grafted in”. They should be amazed at the grace of God that they were permitted to become part of God’s “faith-family”. They should not be arrogant toward the branches that were removed, but they ought to humbly be grateful that God’s grace was extended to *them*. “...they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (vs. 20-22). The point of these verses is the reminder to the Gentiles that they were no better than those who had been removed. If they continued in the faith, God would continue to show them His favor, ...but if they reject God, they also could “fall-aside” and be removed. And for the errant Jews? If they were to repent and come to faith, God will graft them into the “tree of faith” again.

“...a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved...” (vss. 25-26). Paul returns to the bigger picture. God is *NOT* done with Israel. As we saw above, there is a “time of the Gentiles”, and there will also be a time when God’s redemptive focus will effectively reach Israel, once again. “...just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.’” Paul quotes from Isaiah 59:20,21. Here, the Hebrew is actually “the Redeemer”. He is not only the Savior, but the Redeemer, the one who pays the price to purchase freedom or forgiveness. The word, “ungodliness”. literally means “undevotedness”. Israel had been very “religious”, but it was mostly external. The Redeemer would remove this lack of heart, and win the true devotion of the people who “turn away” from this external religion. God will establish a new covenant with the people of Israel, ...one centered upon His Spirit, according to Isaiah 59:21.

The majority of Jews of Paul’s day were hostile to the gospel, but this turned out to be a blessing to the Gentiles. In spite of this, Israel remained beloved by God “for the sake of the fathers”. Just as God had chosen to work with the patriarchs so many centuries earlier, He will again work to draw their descendants to Himself. “For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of *their* disobedience, so *these* also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you *they* also may now be shown mercy” (vss. 30-31). There is a certain poetic justice to all of this. God chose Israel to be a vehicle to bring a redemptive plan to pass that would benefit all nations. Now, He is using the Gentiles to draw the Jews to recognize the Savior-Redeemer He brought to the world through them. “For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all” (vs. 32). *We are all saved the same way: only by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, chosen and received by faith.* None of us can boast in ourselves. If we boast in anything, *it is only God we can boast in.*

Paul ends this section with a doxology, a word or proclamation of praise. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (vs. 33). Paul had given us a tiny glimpse into the incomprehensible plan of God for salvation history, ...how He chose to use the nation of Israel to bring His Savior and salvation plan into the world, ...and how He is now using the authentic spirituality of Gentile Christians to make errant Israel jealous, and to draw them back to Him. *It all comes from God, and flows back to bring Him the glory and praise!*